

Black Abolitionists in the Age of Jackson

Catalysts in the Radicalization of American Abolitionism

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"While among us, blacks have never been permitted to become one of us." "Being black is to arrive early at the realization that although you are *a part of* the society, you will always be *apart from* the society." These expressions have achieved a degree of currency in America today, but the ideas behind the language dressing are anything but new. James Baldwin may decry the fact that nobody knows his name, and Ralph Ellison that he is an invisible man. But the theme of Negro invisibility was coincident with the forced arrival of the black man in the New World in the fifteenth century. One only casually familiar with the history of blacks in America would be forced to conclude that so much time has passed and so little has changed.

The single reform activity in which one would expect the role of blacks to have been carefully noted has been all but ignored. Despite the voluminous scholarly literature on American abolitionism, the role of Negroes in the crusade to abolish slavery and uplift the free blacks has been little studied. Indeed, only in recent years have a spate of articles appeared on the subject, and only within the past year (1969) were we treated to a book-length survey of the largely

neglected role played by black abolitionists in ante bellum America's most significant reform movement (see Quarles, 1969; Litwack, 1961; Duberman, 1965; Davis, 1967).

This paper argues not merely that blacks were significantly involved in the abolitionist crusade, but, more specifically, that the more radical antislavery offensive of the early thirties and forties was to a large extent inspired, and not infrequently directed, by black abolitionists.¹

Several studies have recently appeared whose authors have directly sought to account for the rise of immediatism in antislavery reform; a number of other recent publications will be seen to shed light, although indirectly, on the same subject. Whether the effort to account for the change in antislavery tactics from moral suasion to overt militancy is direct or oblique, one factor is constant in all interpretations: it is taken as given that the Negro had little or no part in accounting for the change.

Illustrative of this neglect is David Donald's (1956: 19-36) essay, "Toward a Reconsideration of Abolitionists." Donald's composite portrait of abolitionist leadership (a composite drawn on the basis of a sample of 106 abolitionists active in the decade of the 1830s) included but three Negroes! Donald does not give us his definition of leadership, but since his leadership category is presumably not limited to those who held office in antislavery organizations, it is remarkable that he could find but three Negroes in the ranks of the leaders in the decade of the thirties. When the American Anti-Slavery Society was organized in 1833, three of the sixty-three delegates were blacks; the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, successor in 1834 to the New England Anti-Slavery Society, elected James G. Barbadoes and Joshua Easton, both Negroes, to its board of counselors (Quarles, 1969). Not only is Donald silent on the participation of colored men and women in the formation of new national societies, but he ignores the fact that Negroes were abolition-minded, having formed Negro antislavery societies in the 1820s and early

1830s in many Northern states. More perplexing yet is Donald's seeming belief that workers on the underground railroad (whites as well as blacks) were not abolitionists. He makes no mention, for example, of William Siebert's (1898) monumental "Directory of Names of Underground Railroad Operators," a directory embracing some 3200 entries, 143 of whom were definitely Negro operators! (See Quarles, 1969.)²

Donald's failure to recognize (or acknowledge) the role of Negroes in the abolitionist movement raises serious doubts about the conclusions he draws in his reconsideration of the abolitionists. His essay (1956) was undertaken "to explain why humanitarian reform appeared in America when it did, and more specifically why immediate abolitionism, so different in tone, method, and membership from its predecessors and its successor, emerge in the 1830s." "Why did the . . . movement become manifest as militant abolitionism in the 1830s," asks Donald (1956: 21-23), "although [favorable circumstances] . . . had no such effect on the previous generation." Donald's answer is a corollary of his thesis which argues that a patrician element in the society, alienated from the "new order," sought to work out its private grievances against the industrial system by indirectly attacking it through slavery.

Viewed against the backgrounds and common ideas of its leaders, abolitionism appears to have been a double crusade. Seeking freedom for the Negro in the South, these reformers were also attempting a restoration of the traditional values of their class at home. Leadership of humanitarian reform may have been influenced by revivalism or by British precedent, but its true origin lay in the drastic dislocation of Northern society. Basically, abolitionism should be considered the anguished protest of an aggrieved class against a world they never made [Donald, 1956: 35-36; see also Duberman, 1962, 1965; Benson, 1960].³

However insightful this conclusion may appear in analyzing the motives of white abolitionists, it hardly begins to

account for the participation of blacks in the abolitionist movement. Consequently, Professor Donald, by identifying but a trio of blacks in the leadership group, may have excluded the very element which might have allowed him to answer more convincingly his own query about "why immediate abolitionism . . . emerged in the 1830s."

Besides the Donald thesis, two additional interpretations—one accounting for the rise of immediatism, the second arguing the essential conservative nature of the movement—while persuasive in their own right—have failed to exploit the full potential of their research, and have thus failed to add an additional dimension to the range of possibilities accounting for immediatism.

IMMEDIATISM IN THE CHURCH

William McLoughlin, John Thomas, David Brion Davis, Whitney Cross, Gilbert Barnes, and others have drawn attention to the role Protestant perfectionism played in making American reformers immediatist-oriented. For Barnes, the religious awakening which swept America in the second quarter of the nineteenth century consisted in rejecting Calvinism—with its beliefs in original sin, human depravity, and predestinarianism—and substituting Revivalism, which emphasized that the individual sinner could, through his own efforts, undergo conversion and thus obtain salvation. Whereas Calvinistic doctrine made people seek to escape life, the doctrine preached by the Revivalists made people want to begin a new life. "Among [Charles Grandison] Finney's converts, this gospel released a mighty impulse toward social reform" (Barnes, 1933: 11).

Other scholars have seen a more direct connection between Revivalism and immediatism. "Perfectionism . . . as an optative mood demanded total commitment and immediate action," John Thomas (1965) has written. Insofar as slavery constituted a flat denial of perfectibility to both Negroes and whites, the perfectionist formula of immediate emancipation

strongly influenced the redirection of abolitionist strategy in the 1830s (Davis, 1967: 156, 158). And Whitney Cross has noted that along with temperance, abolition was one of the largest and most noteworthy social causes which revival religion espoused. "Immediate emancipation . . . arose in the 1830s," Cross (1950) has written, "as a manifestation of religious ultraism." The intensity of the ultraists' involvement in abolitionism stemmed from their conviction that slavery was sinful, and hence slavery was seen as a major hindrance to the revival of spirituality which was to introduce the early millennium. More revealing for the thesis this paper is seeking to defend is Cross's disclosure that abolition sentiment came to center in the Baptist and Methodist churches. Substantial portions of the membership in both these denominations became abolitionists, notes Cross; abolitionism, in fact, was the chief issue responsible for the national schism in Baptist ranks in 1845, and the same issue lay behind the establishment of the Wesleyan Methodist Church which by 1843 had six thousand proabolitionist members spread across nine states (Cross, 1950: 217, 225, 222, 262).⁷

The point that has not been observed or sufficiently stressed—when it has been noted at all—is that a majority of black church members belonged to one or the other of these denominations. Knowing what we do of the central significance for the free black community of the separate or independent Negro church, we can confidently believe that an overwhelming majority of the free black population (319,000 in 1830) were active church members. It seems more than warrantable, then, to hypothesize that the influence of revivalism in radicalizing the antislavery crusade was more pervasive among black abolitionists than among their white counterparts in the movement (see Washington, 1964; Frazier 1963; Meier and Rudwick, 1966).⁵ Consequently, to argue that blacks were catalysts in the radicalization of American abolitionism is to be sensitive to the interrelationship of a people and their particular historical situation.

CONSERVATISM IN THE NATIONAL CHARACTER

A second thesis which convincingly argues that certain traits in the national character had the effect of giving the abolitionist crusade a conservative bent is seen, upon closer examination, to have had much less influence on black than on white Americans. In his insightful essay, "The Northern Response to Slavery," Martin Duberman (1965) shows why northerners—most of whom disapproved of slavery—were "nonextensionists" rather than abolitionists. "Why," asks Duberman (1965: 398) "did not an aroused antislavery conscience turn to more certain measures and demand more unequivocal action?" Duberman's (1965: 396) answer revolves around what he sees as basic and widely shared tenets of the national character operative in American reform in the antebellum period. The traditional American disdain for "extremism" together with American faith in the inevitability of progress mandated that the approach to any reform effort would be flexible, piecemeal, and pragmatic. "Nonextension" and "containment" were simply contemporary labels affixed to the old beliefs in "time" or the inevitability of progress. "Containing the institution of slavery would, in the long run, be tantamount to destroying it; a more direct assault was unnecessary. In this sense, the doctrine of nonextension was but a more sophisticated version of the standard faith in 'time' " (Duberman, 1965: 397; also Cross, 1950: 199).⁶

In addition to the widespread belief in the inevitability of progress over time (or through the transcendental belief in the progressive perfectability of mankind), Jacksonian Americans were likely to eschew immediatism, because "to have adopted the path of direct abolition . . . might have meant risking individual respectability" (Duberman, 1965: 398). Furthermore, abolitionism's unsavory reputation made many reluctant to risk reprisals against their persons, or family, or to jeopardize their economic security by being identified with "fanatics," "extremists," "radicals," and "agitators."

A more persuasive factor explaining the overwhelming conservatism of Americans on the question of immediatism is that the doctrine (Duberman, 1965: 398) "challenged the northern hierarchy of values. To many, a direct assault on slavery meant a direct assault on private property and the Union as well."

As heirs of the Lockean tradition, Americans believed—almost without reservation—that the sanctity of private property constituted the essential cornerstone for all other liberties. And the fear (Duberman, 1965: 399-400) that this belief—held tenaciously by southerners as well as northerners—might very well eventuate in the breakup of the union was "no less real for being in part irrational."

HOW BLACKS VIEWED ABOLITIONISM

A moment's reflection should make it obvious that the very characteristics in the national temper identified by Professor Duberman, and tending to make most white Americans conservative, nonmilitant gradualists, were specifically calculated to have the opposite effect on Negro Americans. What made blacks abolitionists in greater proportion, and black abolitionists catalytic agents in the radicalization of American abolitionism is related to the fact that black leaders, and those they led, did not, because they could not, identify with the features of the American character we have identified. Certainly, the free black community had very tangible reasons for not having blind faith in the inevitability of human progress. In most instances their individual histories told a different story. Likewise, the belief that a direct frontal attack on slavery compromised cherished values—namely the sanctity of private property—or that it was possible the South might make good on its threat to break up the Union over this issue by seceding—neither of these, can it persuasively be argued, would operate to mitigate the black demand for more direct measures and

more unequivocal action. Sanctity of private property would act as an inhibition to militancy specifically on those who owned property, or on those who saw the likelihood of doing so in the foreseeable future. Neither condition obtained insofar as the overwhelming majority of free blacks were concerned. As for the Union, it was, at best, a mixed blessing in the eyes of most free blacks; their major loyalty was not to a place, nor a people, but to a principle. And so long as liberty was denied them, Negroes without masters (as well as those in bondage) were likely to have a very tenuous concern for the preservation of the Union.

As for respectability, Negroes, vis-à-vis the white majority, had literally nothing to lose. Crimes against their persons were commonplace, whether Negroes were in or out of abolitionist ranks (see Sheeler, 1946; Turner, 1911).⁷ And since blacks were at the very bottom of the economic ladder, they stood to lose little or nothing because of their activism.

In sum, then, a number of widely shared cultural values acted less exclusively on the black community, which fact more readily disposed Negroes toward extremism. On the other hand, these same cultural forces which made for conservatism, because they were more inviolable to white Americans, correspondingly exercised a moderating influence on white social philosophy and behavior.

Turning from the more legitimately historical studies of reformism such as those of Donald, Cross, and Duberman which we have just examined, to a consideration of reform from the perspective of the disciplines of sociology and psychology, it appears to this writer that the more theoretical writings of the social scientists can also be used to argue that the black community was more prone to militancy than was the white.

ELEMENTS OF REFORMISM

In his controversial study on slavery, Stanley Elkins (1968: 157-164) has identified five elements typifying American

reformism, namely: disruption of expectations, an absence of total crisis conditions, the absence of clear institutional arrangements for channeling radical energy, the participation of intellectuals who are not compromised because of their institutional connections, and the most universal element, which has come to assume a unique and disproportionate role in American reform activity—guilt.⁸

If Elkins (1968: 158) is correct when he says that the intensity of reform activity is not necessarily related to the seriousness of the abuse requiring reform, but is a product of the five forces identified above, then black people and black abolitionists were all the more likely to be militant than were their white counterparts. Suffice it to say now that the quasifree black community was all the more likely than the white to have their expectations compromised or squelched altogether. Certainly the absence of clear institutional arrangements for channeling radical dissent was more characteristic of the free Negro community whose churches and few mutual aid societies represented the sum total of institutions through which radical dissent could be channeled; and it goes without gainsaying that Negro intellectuals involved in the antislavery movement were less likely than white intellectuals to be compromised because of their institutional connections. Not only were there fewer institutions in the black community to which Negroes were accountable (and fewer still in the white community to which they were admitted), but the relative “newness” of Negro institutions meant that such institutions were more open and less encrusted with hoary rules and regulations which could inhibit innovation or radicalism. Finally, Elkins sees the fifth point—guilt—as the factor most calculated to intensify or radicalize reform activity. Negroes could hardly be expected to feel guilty about the institution of slavery. On the contrary, the existence of slavery and the virulence of American racism were more likely to be cathartic for blacks, resulting in feelings of moral superiority rather than moral guilt. Why,

then, can it not be argued—to turn Elkins' argument around—that the absence of guilt among Negroes could just as easily result in the intensification of reform activity as the presence of guilt could among whites?

Stanley Elkins' five-point theoretical construct, then, while it helps explain the "intensity of reform activity" generally, shows more particularly why blacks were in the vanguard of the movement to radicalize abolitionism in the 1830s and 1840s.

Similarly, the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins suggests to me that the great majority of Negroes were more susceptible to radical or immediatist appeals than were white Americans.

In seeking to determine the types of personalities predisposed toward reform, as well as the social dynamics of commitment, Tomkins (1967: 46-62) most persuasively argues that violence and suffering play a central role.⁹ While Tomkins' hypothesis was tested by examining the private lives and careers of four white abolitionists (Garrison, Phillips, Weld, and Birney), his construct for social engagement is even more enlightening when used to account for *the nature* of the black involvement in the abolitionist crusade.¹⁰

The expanded definition Tomkins gives to the terms "violence" and "suffering," wherein violence connotes not simply an overt physical act but a "threat" and even "verbal insult," and suffering, by extension, implies feelings of humiliation, rage, terror, and the like, this insight when considered in relation to Negroes in the ante bellum America (at any time, for that matter), tells us a good deal about the psychological dynamics motivating Negroes toward stronger radicalism, toward more intense extremism.¹¹

The findings of a recent study by two black psychiatrists are informative. In their book, *Black Rage* (1968), William Grier and Price Cobbs have written of the suffering and violence which has been, and is, the lot of Negroes in America:

In every part of the nation . . . [Negroes] are subjected to physical and verbal abuse, humiliation, unlawful search and seizure, and harassment by authorities. Its members [Negro families] are jailed, beaten, robbed, killed, and raped, and exposed to this kind of jeopardy to a degree unheard of in white families [1968: 68].

If it be argued that matters were different in the 1830s than they are today, the lament of the *New York Weekly Advocate* (1837) tells a different story:

We [Negroes] are all the victims of relentless persecution, our enemies are constantly heaping upon us the most biting calumny; and we are all without discrimination, branded with the epithets of vicious, degraded and worthless.

If violence and suffering induce people into reform activity, and if such considerations lay behind a more committed brand of reform activity, then it would appear that Negroes—in proportion to whites—would more likely be reformers (abolitionists), and black abolitionists would more likely be militant abolitionists.^{1 2}

Thus it is reasonable to argue that a significant reason why immediatism appeared so forcefully in the 1830s and 1840s was because historical, sociological, and psychological forces at work in America at this time “conspired” to affect the Negro community (and the Negro mentality) in an almost unique fashion. The consequences stemming from this comingling of history, sociology, and psychology, with a black population which was itself made receptive (resonant) by the workings of these same forces, was a significant dynamic in the radicalization of American abolitionism in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

The burden of this essay has been to discuss the change in American abolitionism which occurred in the third decade of

the nineteenth century, and more specifically, to offer an explanation accounting for that change. The explanations we have been given to date are incomplete to the extent that they fail to see Negroes—North and South, free and enslaved—as prime movers in the organized movement to abolish slavery and uplift the free blacks. Negro leaders (and so, too, their followers) can be seen to have been a different breed of abolitionists. In the 1830s and 1840s, Negroes came to hold views very different from whites concerning the ethos of the abolitionist crusade, the goals to be achieved, and the methods to be used in accomplishing objectives. They were the first to lose faith in moral suasion and the appeal to right reason as a solution to rampant American racism; they went far beyond their white supporters (establishing many independent institutions for the purpose) in bringing the abolitionist rhetoric down from the rarefied realms of abstraction to the more mundane, but real, issues which affected the quality of life for Negro Americans. Blacks also determined to remain in America; they would work for and with the political system to ameliorate the condition of the race and—if necessary—they would (and did) support extralegal measures to close the gaping hiatus between the rhetoric of the American Creed and the realities of American life. It was, in short, through their efforts that immediate abolitionism, so different in tone, method, and membership from its predecessors, emerged when it did. It is indeed high time that we repossess the important historical truth that black abolitionists in the Age of Jackson were the catalysts behind the radicalization of American abolitionism.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper the words radicalization (radicals), immediatism (immediatists), militancy (militants), and extremism (extremists) will be used interchangeably. When employed they are meant to suggest opposition to both

the tactics and the philosophy which characterized abolitionism before 1830—appeasement, conciliation, gradualism, compensated emancipation, and colonization. When violence is implied in employing any of these terms, it will be so stated.

2. Quarles has shown that despite an objective assessment of the participation of Negroes in the underground railroad, Siebert unwittingly omits the Negro identity of several blacks who played a prominent part. See Quarles, 1969: 145.

3. For a convincing antidote to the Donald class thesis see the two essays by Duberman, "The abolitionist and psychology" (1962), and "The northern response to slavery" (1965: 403 ff.) If Duberman's essays qualify Donald's interpretation, the work of L. Benson (1960) would seem to support it. "I cannot suppress the belief," wrote Benson, "that a strong causal relationship existed between . . . the Transportation Revolution and the egalitarian movements that lead me to call the years from 1825 to 1850 the Age of Egalitarianism. In short, my hypothesis holds that the boom in transportation *and the dynamic expansion of the economy* [italics added] acted as powerful stimulants to movements inspired by the egalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence. I do not contend that one-to-one relationships existed between the revolution in transportation and the rise of egalitarianism. But it is suggestive, at least, that . . . their reciprocal relationships" can hardly be accounted for by coincidence alone (see Benson, 1960: 12-13).

4. While the bulk of Cross's conclusions relate specifically to New York, the author was careful to remark that his observations on the relationship between Revivalism and abolitionism were applicable on a national scale. "The Burned-Over District seized leadership in the abolition crusade, and the consequent influence of this region upon the enlarged antislavery agitation . . . constitutes the most important single contribution of western New York's enthusiastic mood to the main currents of national history" (1950: 217).

5. The Negro church was a multipurpose agency. In addition to serving as a house of worship, the church was a social center, a meeting place for reformist groups, a sanctuary for escaped slaves, and a schoolhouse. The subject is best pursued by Washington (1964). Washington also establishes that most Negroes were either Baptists or Methodists. See also Frazier (1963: 23, 24, 28, 30, 43); Meier and Rudwick (1966: 74-83). The figure for the free black population for 1830 is found in Quarles (1963: 83).

6. W. Cross concurs in portraying the Jacksonians as inveterate optimists. "The dogma of American democracy, vigorously rising in Jacksonian days, contained a supreme optimism, a belief in the ultimate perfection of society through progressive improvement in humankind." Church folk, cautions Cross, shared this conviction in qualified form. "They believed progress to be attainable by human effort and practically inevitable; but they derived from their Calvinistic tradition an equally powerful suspicion that the natural tendency, unaided by willful diligence, was toward degeneracy" (1950: 199).

7. Anti-Negro sentiment frequently took the form of mob action and violence, especially in the large centers of Negro population. In 1829, Cincinnati mobs helped to convince more than half of the Negro inhabitants of that city that flight was preferable to violence. Violence broke out in New York City in 1834,

and flared even more frequently in Philadelphia, where between 1832 and 1849, mobs set off five major anti-Negro riots. See Sheeler (1946: 213-214); and Turner (1911: 160-165).

8. Although Elkins is a historian, his study of slavery is, in my judgment, more properly identified as sociological rather than historical.

9. Professor Tomkins (1967: 60) elaborates on what he means by "violence" and "suffering": "By violence I refer to any negative effect inflicted with intent to hurt. This negative effect may be an aggressive *threat of physical violence or a verbal insult*. By suffering, I refer to any negative effect produced in the victim as a result of violence, *whether this be a feeling of humiliation, helpless rage, terror, or distress*" (italics added).

10. Tomkins' construct accounting for social commitment, that is, the stages in the development of commitment, involves the following progression: *resonance* (the ability of any organized ideology or social movement to engage commitment); *risk-taking*, a consequence of which is *punishment*, which in turn *heightens resonance*, which induces the committed to take *greater risks*, which exposes the risk-taker to more punishment. The cumulative consequence of this syndrome of resonance-guilt-punishment, and so on, is total commitment to reform—reform now becoming a way of life. The martyr complex (that is, seeing violence inflicted on, say, abolitionists, and the empathy thus established between observer and victim) is the social dynamic which brings recruits into the ranks (1967: 58-59).

11. The criterion of extremism as used here and elsewhere in this paper is simply any proposal which is more drastic than that favored by the majority at a given time; it does not imply the most extreme tactic or strategy that *could* be put forward.

12. To make this point is not to deny that violence and suffering can also cause people to "cop-out" and escape persecution. When Negro leaders petitioned the Ohio legislature in 1829 following an attempt by Cincinnati's officials to enforce the Ohio Black Laws—an attempt which resulted in white mobs attacking Negroes—more than half the Negro population of Cincinnati fled to Canada and other parts of the United States (Meier and Rudwick, 1966: 97). Also see note 7.

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